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VICTOR HUGO'S OPERAS

It has become a matter of convention among historians of French literature to accept the fate of Victor Hugo's plays as an obvious phenomenon. The rapid decrease in popularity of these tragedies (once the standard-bearers of romanticism) is in fact considered symbolic of the *débacle* of the entire school. And it must be confessed that in assuming this viewpoint the historians have some right on their side. The hold of Victor Hugo's plays upon the public was at best insecure; the 'victory' of *Hernani* was never so complete as to remain unchallenged, while the decline in popularity of the succeeding tragedies only served to emphasize the Pyrrhic nature of that alleged triumph. The classicists of 1830 would seem, therefore, to have been vindicated, although the alchemy of time has distilled out of their violent hostility the more elegant attitude of easy disdain. The quintessence of this modern pose (now pretty generally assumed) finds perhaps its best illustration in the words of the eminent critic, Gustave Lanson:—

“Ces malheureux drames, ne se tiennent pas sur leurs pieds.”¹

In the plot of *Ruy Blas* he discovers a “scénario de farce”,² etc. Other experts take equal delight in refusing Hugo all claim to serious distinction as dramatist; indeed, the opinion seems about unanimous to-day that it would have been better for his reputation had he abstained from writing for the stage.

The soundness of this judgment depends, of course, upon the assumption that Hugo's dramatic works are plays, and it must be admitted that if we accept this premise no very favorable deduction can be drawn from it. Hugo's tragedies offend, and offend roundly, almost every law that convention demands in the spoken drama. It would appear, then, that unless we deny at the outset the validity of this generally accepted premise, small hope will be left us of reaching a more favorable judgment.

¹ *Histoire de la Littérature Française*, p. 965.

² *Ibid.*, p. 966.

Paradoxical as such a course may appear, a careful examination of Hugo's dramatic works will reveal facts that will give such revision much plausibility.

One of the fundamental features of romanticism has been the deviation of creative energy into new channels. The importance of this curious phenomenon cannot be over-emphasized, for to it is due the displacement of the conception of essentials, which, of all romantic traits, is the most irritating to the humanists. The fact that a man's gifts focussed instinctively (without any volition on his part) on the borderland between two *genres*, or between two arts, led him to take for granted the correctness of this new position and to erect upon it a new philosophy. It is thus that we have the doctrine of the *mélange des genres*, the comic and the tragic, the grotesque and the beautiful, but especially the doctrine of the *mélange des arts*. The latter confusion, being the subtler of the two, has not received from the critics the attention, in point of quantity and quality, which it deserves. It has been too often the custom to dismiss it as a freakish corollary of romanticism, a desire on the part of a few extremists, like Tieck or Gautier, to shock the philistine, whereas, in point of fact, it is one of the most significant symptoms of the romantic malady.

The attempt of so many writers, painters and musicians, to make their art encroach upon the domain of another, or indeed of several others, is not, as some determined classicists maintain, a deliberate '*parti pris*', but simply the working out of the inevitable. The artist is not—in the beginning, at least—a self-conscious *poseur*, although that may come later. He is in reality doing his best, according to the nature of his gifts, which happen to concentrate themselves upon the borderland between two, or more, arts. The hybrid product that results must, in consequence, be estimated from a different angle than that taken by certain champions of humanism, who would deny artistic predestination and have us believe that a man can decide upon his endowment. To this fallacy in criticism is due a large measure of the impatience exhibited by the devotees of classicism toward the plays of Victor Hugo.

The disfavor which these unfortunate dramas have encoun-

tered from the experts is a striking illustration of the power of convention. Hugo's critics have found fault with him for failing to do a certain thing, when, as a matter of fact, he was attempting to do something else. For, if we drop the traditional conception and examine his *théâtre* without bias, we shall find that Hugo's endowment for the stage was a peculiar one. Its essence consists, not so much in the *mélange des genres* (as he and everybody else thought), as in the *mélange des arts*; that is, his gift is to be discovered, not at the centre of one art, tragedy, but on the borderland between two arts, tragedy and opera. Appreciation of this singular fact will, it is obvious, alter materially the critical point of view; many of Hugo's seemingly wanton violations of custom will assume a more favorable complexion, while the more serious defects of his work, if they cannot be entirely condoned, will at least escape the conventional verdict of 'voluntary eccentricity'.

From the outset, Hugo has been severely dealt with by the connoisseurs for the melodramatic quality of his plots. Critics, both in France and out, never cease to berate the enormous antitheses upon which all of his plays are built. The violent juxtaposition of incompatibles—expressed either by two characters, king *versus* bandit: *Hernani*; or by one character, mother *versus* murderess: *Lucrèce Borgia*—they find not only highly improbable, but, what is far worse, utterly ridiculous. This estimate, correct enough if we hold to the traditional view—that his tragedies belong to the spoken drama—will appear less severe the moment we view them as transposed music drama. Indeed, the very enormity of the Hugo antithesis, an admittedly serious blemish in tragedy, becomes not merely excusable, but actually a virtue, in opera. The reason for this seeming paradox is to be found, as will presently appear, in the different nature of the two arts.

Save for pantomime, the drama reaches our consciousness through two channels, the eye and the ear. To impart its full significance, it needs both, for the action which it portrays is a double one, physical as well as psychological. This fact demands of the playwright two media of expression, the gesture and the word. The gesture, it is clear, will account for approximately

ninety per cent. of the physical action; the word, for ninety per cent. of the psychological action. And, of course, these two media overlap on the boundary, where the psychological action begins to overflow into the physical.

Now, the chief difference between the spoken drama and the music drama is this: that in the music drama, the word, being sung, becomes less explicit than in the spoken drama. It is a matter of common knowledge, although, perhaps, not of common admission, that few in the audience actually understand what is being sung on the stage. Particularly true is this in the case of concerted pieces—duets, trios, quartets—where several voices are singing simultaneously. Tacit admission of this fact is evinced in the printing on the programme of the plot of the opera. The point that concerns us, however, is that the weakening in precision of one medium of expression (the word) puts an additional burden upon the other (the gesture). The result is obvious. Unless some change is made, much of the action that would be perfectly intelligible in the spoken drama will become unintelligible in the music drama. It is this change which is the essence of opera.

The necessity of emphasizing the gesture, in order to keep the plot intelligible, obliged the writers of opera, first, to reduce the psychological action to its lowest terms, and, second, to express this simplified action wherever possible in terms of the physical; in short, to translate the word into the gesture. The violent antitheses which swarm in opera are simply instances of this attempt on the librettists' part to render a psychological contrast in terms of the physical. The enormity of these antitheses is to be explained by the fact that the gesture, being less articulate than the word, must be proportionately more copious to express the same amount. The melodramatic climax, the harsh juxtaposition of incompatibles, becomes, therefore, not merely permissible, but actually necessary, in the music drama, for the narration of the story must reach the audience to a large extent through the eye. If we bear these facts in mind, much of the tumultuously physical that predominates in Hugo's theatre will find its explanation.

The melodramatic contrasts of plot upon which his critics

harp are, as we can now realize, due in a measure to the unconsciously operative nature of Hugo's gift. The violent antitheses contained in the basic idea, buffoon *versus* king (*Le Roi S'amuse*); lackey *versus* queen (*Ruy Blas*); bandit *versus* emperor (*Hernani*), etc., are really nothing more than the attempt—and it was not a deliberate attempt in his case—to render physically visible a psychological conflict.

The claptrap climax, which the classicists deplore as one of his favorite devices, is merely the application of the same principle within the compass of the scene. The intrusion of the Black Domino amid the brilliant masqueraders in *Hernani*,³ the funeral procession in *Marie Tudor*,⁴ the huge scarlet litter of Richelieu in *Marion de Lorme*,⁵ etc., are all characteristic instances of Hugo's use of the stunning gesture to relieve the word of the burden of narration. The sudden opening of secret doors in *Angelo* and *Ruy Blas*,⁶ the stealthy entrance of mysterious slaves in *Ruy Blas*,⁷ the sounds of sword-fighting around the corner in *Marion de Lorme*,⁸ and, again, the tumbling down the chimney of Don Cæsar in *Ruy Blas*,⁹ are further evidence of Hugo's reliance upon the dazzling gesture as a means of communication with his audience.

This unconscious preference for the gesture in the matter of dramatic narration is highly significant. It implies a weakening in precision of the word, which, as we shall see later, is one of the most curious features of Hugo's gift. Before passing to that, however, it might be well to complete our examination of Hugo's faculty for expressing action in terms of external antithesis. The instances of this practice quoted above are, with a single exception, all of the same kind. The gesture in every case save one is visual, and, although this variety is an essential part of opera, it is by no means the most essential.

The chief attraction of the music drama is, after all, the music. Indispensable as are the other things, they remain, nevertheless, of secondary importance, for they are insufficient of themselves to confer immortality. Now, although we have come to accept

³ V, 1.⁴ Second Day, Second Part, Sc. 1.⁵ V, 7.⁶ *Angelo*, Second Day, Sc. 1; *Ruy Blas*, IV, 6.⁷ IV, 3.⁸ I, 2.⁹ IV, 2.

music without questioning as to the language of opera, it is manifestly logical that the best operas will always be those in which music has some *raison d'être*, some excuse for its presence besides that of convention. In other words, the skilful writer of opera will endeavor, wherever possible, to weave the music into the texture of the plot, until the two become inseparable, until the presence of one is imperative to a complete understanding of the other. The application of this difficult principle calls obviously for imagination, and imagination of an especial quality, if it is to be a success. Indeed, the thing presents exceptional obstacles, for music, as Boileau shrewdly pointed out, cannot narrate. Its primary function is the presentation of emotion, and of emotion in its most abstract form, the mood. In other words, music is lyric, rather than dramatic. If we grant this premise, it becomes at once evident that music can hope to portray action in one way only, through antithesis; and since the domain of music is the lyric, it follows that the strictly musical antithesis can be achieved only by the juxtaposition of contrasting lyrics, the striking *rapprochement* of sharply divergent moods. In practice, this means that the writer of opera, instead of addressing the mind of the audience directly, is obliged by the exigencies of his art, to address it obliquely. He can narrate, but only suggestively, through the mood, in contradistinction to the playwright, who can create a mood, but only suggestively through narration. Now, it is in the possession of precisely this faculty, the ability to express his action in terms of musical antithesis, that we shall find striking evidence of the operatic nature of Hugo's gifts.

The clearest instances of this peculiar *tour de force* occur in *Hernani*, *Le Roi S'amuse*, and *Lucrèce Borgia*. As a matter of fact, the *dénouement* in all three plays is accomplished not merely to music, but actually through music. In *Hernani* the love duet,¹⁰ an exquisite lyric mood, is shattered by the long-drawn note of the horn, the symbol of death. *Hernani*, the audience instantly remembers, had given Ruy Gomez the horn with the promise that should the latter wish him to die, he need

¹⁰ *Hernani* and Doña Sol, V, 3.

but sound it, and all would be over. The dramatic shock which this strictly musical antithesis imparts has not been denied by even the most grudging of humanists; but, while they admit its power, they refuse to appreciate its significance. This sharp juxtaposition of the moods of love and death unties the dramatic knot, and this untying, it should be noted, is done by music. The point is that what we have here is not tragedy, but opera. The *dénouement* of *Le Roi S'amuse* exhibits an even greater ingenuity in the use of this essentially operatic principle. The revelation of the tragic situation is even more startling than in *Hernani*, for in *Le Roi S'amuse* it is ironic. The jester Triboulet,¹¹ wild with triumphant hate, is about to cast into the river the sack supposed to contain the body of the king (who had seduced his daughter), when he hears in the distance the king's voice, singing gaily: "*Souvent la femme varie*". The tragic force at this moment of the brilliant song is intensified by the contrast between the flippancy of the song itself and the mood of frantic despair which it occasions in the breast of the wretched Triboulet. The antithesis here is certainly enormous, but inasmuch as music is the least explicit of the arts, the strictly musical antithesis must be enormous if it is to be intelligible. Hugo's arrangement is, therefore, eminently laudable if we remember that his work is not spoken drama, but transposed music drama.

The most striking example, however, of the presentation of the catastrophe in terms of music occurs in *Lucrèce Borgia*,¹² The mood of impious gaiety created by the drinking-song is set off in harsh relief against the sombre chorus of the monks. The contrast between pagan revelry and the gloom of mediæval Christianity offered by this scene is of a power that would be difficult to surpass, but what concerns us, especially, is the fact that the effect is gained by means of music. The words merely serve as the skeleton design which the music fills in. Particularly is this true of the monks' chant, the text of which is Latin, and therefore incomprehensible to the audience. Indeed, this scene is a most felicitous illustration of the operatic principle, for it combines, with much skill, the two types of antithesis, the vis-

¹¹ V, 3.

¹² III, 1.

ual and the musical. By itself it would almost suffice to demonstrate the borderland nature of Hugo's gift, for it evidently 'straddles' the boundary separating the spoken drama from the music drama.

This kind of antithesis is, however, not confined in Hugo's *théâtre* to the presentation of the *dénouement*, but is frequently used to impart color to the exposition. The charming lyric, *A quoi bon entendre les oiseaux des bois*,¹³ is inserted with the definite purpose of portraying by contrast of mood the wretchedness of royalty. The happy voices of the washerwomen, singing in the heather, emphasize in poignant fashion the tragic loneliness of the Queen of Spain, imprisoned in her grandeur. Other instances of this trick may be found in *Angelo*,¹⁴ and *Les Burgraves*.¹⁵

All of these examples have, it should be noted, one important factor in common: they need the actual presence of music to gain their effect. This might certainly be taken as a basis for the argument that the scenes are not genuine *transpositions d'art*, but careful consideration will reveal them to be simply the counterpart of modern programme-music, which needs the written word, in the title at least, to make its purpose intelligible. That is, Hugo's words must have, in these scenes, the assistance of music to achieve their end, just as Debussy's music, for example, must have the help of words to create its illusion. In both cases there is overlapping, a not infrequent occurrence in these borderland *genres*, which gives them a very definite flavor. The main body of Hugo's *théâtre*, however, remains just on literature's side of the boundary, and justifies, as we shall presently see, the application of the term, *transposition d'art*.

I have said above that Hugo's insistence upon the gesture, visual as well as musical, is operatic in that it implies a weakening in precision of the word. This, as we have seen, is one of the fundamental characteristics of opera. A psychological conflict such as we find in seventeenth-century French tragedy cannot, therefore, be rendered by music, for tones are inarticulate; they cannot express with precision delicate *nuances*, whether of thought

¹³ *Ruy Blas*, II, 1.

¹⁴ Second Day, Sc. 4.

¹⁵ Part One, I, 5.

or of emotion. The stock criticism of his foes is that Hugo's dramas contain little or no psychological action; the reason for this absence of internal conflict, however, seems to have eluded them. Had they examined his work without prejudice, they would undoubtedly have discovered that Hugo, wherever possible, uses words precisely as the musician uses tones. That is, instead of emphasizing presentation of action, he emphasizes creation of mood. The movement of his plays is, in consequence, essentially operatic in that it is *intermittent* rather than *continuous*. Where the action in a tragedy by Racine, for instance, maintains an unbroken flow from the first line to the last, in Hugo's tragedies it proceeds by fits and starts: a rapid bit of exposition and then a pause, a smashing antithesis and then another pause. Now this curious principle, which so irritates the experts, we shall discover to be characteristic of opera, for, inasmuch as music can only create a mood, it is evident that a good opera will contain as little actual narration and as much mood as possible. In other words, the operatic poet will endeavor to present his story through a series of mood-pictures connected one with another by summary bits of narration. This, in point of fact, is exactly Hugo's method—with one significant difference: that he creates his mood-pictures by words instead of by tones. The parallel here is extremely curious: in both cases, in actual opera as in transposed opera, the ultimate effect is much the same; the difference consists in the means used to obtain that effect. In both cases there is a weakening in precision of the word; but in opera this is due to a physical cause, in transposed opera to a psychical cause. In opera the word is swallowed up by the music and becomes in consequence unintelligible; in transposed opera the situation is more subtle, for here the word itself lacks narrative precision. Instead of concentrating upon action, it concentrates upon the emotional and æsthetic by-products of action, of which the most important, for operatic purposes, is the mood. In other words, in transposed opera, the poet's own nature interferes with direct presentation, whereas in actual opera it is the music that interferes.

It is of some interest to observe just how this works out in practice. Hugo's poetical gift has usually been considered to

incline rather towards painting than towards music; and this, as a matter of fact, is true. Ideas as well as emotions appear to him almost always in the form of pictures, but, inasmuch as these pictures are expressed by words (which are sounds) instead of colors, they lack the precision of colors, and in consequence incline to the vagueness of musical suggestion. The ultimate effect of them is, therefore, the creation of a mood that is sufficiently inarticulate to border on the type of mood peculiar to music. As words, however, are less vague than tones, Hugo is forced to create his indeterminate mood obliquely in opposition to the musician, who can do it directly. Indeed, Hugo's method is the exact counterpart of the method practised by such an artist as Debussy, for Hugo creates a mood, at second-hand, through a picture, whereas Debussy creates a picture, at second-hand, through a mood.

A fair majority, if not all, of the scenes which have made Hugo's tragedies famous illustrate this phenomenon with singular clarity. In *Hernani* the gallery of the portraits,¹⁶ the love duet,¹⁷ and the great monologue of Don Carlos,¹⁸ are nothing if not primarily mood-pictures. Of themselves, they do not advance the story a jot; like the set airs in opera they are frankly to be enjoyed, apart from the play, for their own beauty, and they occupy the proscenium at their leisure while the action waits modestly off-stage for its cue.

Such an arrangement, it is obvious, represents the exact opposite of the classical conception that every scene must contribute to the progress of the plot. Nothing could illustrate the antithesis offered by these two formulas better than a comparison of the monologue of Don Carlos in *Hernani* with the monologue of Don Rodrigue, which concludes the first act of the *Cid*. In Corneille's work, the soliloquy portrays a psychic action, and it ends with the completion of that action. In Hugo's work, the soliloquy portrays a mood and ends before the psychic action has begun. In short, Don Rodrigue reaches his decision before he leaves the stage; Don Carlos leaves the stage before he reaches his decision. Don Carlos's soliloquy belongs, therefore, not to

¹⁶ III, 6.¹⁷ V, 3.¹⁸ IV, 2.

the spoken drama, but to the music drama, and is simply a magnificent baritone aria, to be enjoyed for its sonorous splendor rather than for any dramatic interest.

Hugo's other works swarm with similar instances,¹⁹ but perhaps the most flagrant case of all occurs in *Ruy Blas*. In this tragedy the plot is held up, not only by individual scenes, but in one instance by an entire act. The work is in reality a four-act drama arbitrarily extended to five, for the story comes to a dead stop with the curtain on Act III, and does not pick up again until Act V. The interregnum is occupied by the comic mood, supplied in this instance by a picturesque buffoon, Don Cæsar, whose connection with the main theme is little more than episodic. The use of pageant¹⁹ may be mentioned as another variety of this practice; the action pauses to allow a visual mood instead of a musical mood.

Finally, if we examine Hugo's characters, we discover here also the working out of the operatic formula. The complaint of the classicists that Hugo's heroes and villains represent violent extremes or swing suddenly from one pole to the other is of a piece with the main body of their criticism. What they fail to appreciate is that such a conception of character is essentially operatic, for, since music is inarticulate, the strictly musical character cannot possess a complex soul. Sensitive analysis of psychological *nuances* cannot be conveyed through the mood, which means that the writer of opera must confine himself in the matter of character-drawing, as in other things, to the principle of striking antithesis. This is precisely what Hugo has done (quite unwittingly, to be sure) in all of his works. *Hernani*, *Doña Sol*, *Marion*, *Ruy Blas*, *Didier*, *Don Salluste*, etc., belong without exception to the transposed music drama, a fact which, if properly appreciated, will do much to palliate their seeming absurdity.

There remains one question which deserves a moment's consideration before we conclude. Hugo's critics might ask, in

¹⁹ *Marion de Lorme*, II, 1; *Lucrèce Borgia*, III, 1; *Angelo*, Second Day, Sc. 2; *Marie Tudor*, Second Day, Sc. 1; *Ruy Blas*, III, 2; *Les Burgraves*, Part One, Sc. 2.

²⁰ *Ruy Blas*, I, 5; *Hernani*, IV, 4

the light of the foregoing considerations, whether these alleged tragedies are not simply libretti,—libretti, indeed, of an unusually high order in that they are the work of a great poet, but conforming nevertheless to all the requisites of that *genre*. This objection, which might at first sight seem embarrassing, will appear less formidable if we compare any of Hugo's dramatic works with the opera that has been drawn from it. If we parallel, for instance, *Rigoletto* with *Le Roi S'amuse*, we find that Hugo's version contains five acts and 1,694 verses, while *Rigoletto* contains three acts and 706 verses. In other words, Hugo's arrangement is longer on paper than Piave's by two acts and 988 verses. The story, however, is identical in both works; and on the stage, if Verdi's music be added to Piave's words, the playing-time of both versions is also about equal. That is, Hugo's work consumes as much actual time in performance as do the combined efforts of Piave and Verdi, or, to express the equation mathematically, $\text{Hugo} = \text{Piave} + \text{Verdi}$. All of which implies that when making his adaptation, Piave eliminated Hugo's verbal music to make room for Verdi's tonal music. The deduction becomes, in consequence, unavoidable that *Le Roi S'amuse* is something more than a mere libretto. Comparison of his other works with the operas made out of them reveals the same process of condensation; in every case Hugo's orchestration has been deleted in order that space may be found for the composer's score. This compression, however, is not obtained by recasting the work; save for minor rearrangements, plot and characters remain unaltered. Retention intact by the librettists of both story and characters was made possible by the essentially musical nature of the original.

Hugo, in short, had an operatic mind; every dramatic idea from plot down to detail of scene occurred to him instinctively in terms of music drama. His astonishing faculty for expressing action through visual antithesis (gesture) or through musical antithesis; his setting forth of plot as well as characters in startling *chiaroscuro*; his fondness for pageant; above all, his use of words to create a mood similar to the set airs of opera rather than to unfold action by the shock of character on character stamps his work unmistakably as transposed music drama. It is to

this hybrid nature of his art that we may ascribe the misunderstanding it has aroused. Friends as well as foes seem to have been puzzled by its curious duality, for it invades at times the domain of tragedy as well as of opera. I have mentioned the scenes²¹ where the presence of actual music is necessary; there are instances of the opposite sort²² where the work is essentially on tragedy's side of the fence. In the main, however, Hugo's work conforms, with remarkable precision, to the peculiar demands of the *transposition d'art*.

That Hugo's *théâtre* should have failed to hold the affections of the French is not surprising. The Gaul is by nature a lover of the *genres tranchés*, and furthermore, he is, of all Continentals, the least musical. Transposed opera would in consequence have but few charms for him. The hostility of the classicists, however, has been hardly less amusing than the enthusiasm of the romanticists. Both sides, as usual, have shown little discretion and less acumen. They were too near the object to secure the proper perspective. Hugo's operas are certainly not the highest form of art, but neither are they the lowest. They belong, on the contrary, to an especial type of theatrical spectacle, a type that has a notably sophisticated nature, and that demands in consequence a similarly sophisticated appreciation. When met half-way, it will be found to possess its own peculiar beauty, and to give, in Aristotelian phrase, its own peculiar pleasure. The *transposition d'art*, moreover, has come to be accepted in other fields, and such works as Gautier's *Emaux et Camées*, or Richard Strauss's *Tone Poems* are no longer questioned. I fail to see, in consequence, why Hugo's operas should be denied recognition, for they are, in point of fact, little more than a different application of the same artistic principle. Indeed, we may properly say that just as Gautier painted pictures without colors, or Mendelssohn wrote songs without words, so Victor Hugo composed operas without music.

FRANCIS A. WATERHOUSE.

The University of Texas.

²¹ *Hernani*, V, 3; *Le Roi S'amuse*, V, 3; *Ruy Blas*, II, 1; *Lucrèce Borgia*, III, 1, etc.

²² *Ruy Blas*; III, V; *Marion de Lorme*, IV, 8.